

Man in the Image of God

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Introduction

Human beings are marvelous creatures made in God's image (Gen. 1:26, 27; 9:6; Ps. 139:14). The greatest fascination for a human mind is that of God and the second greatest fascination is that of a human being made in God's image. The disciplines of anthropology, psychology, anatomy, sociology, the science of human development, history, philosophy, etc. all speak of this compulsion to explore and understand a human being. This very effort speaks to a mystery of our being that must be unlocked.

Understanding and accepting the details of this existential reality of man in the image of God is imperative if an individual is to live with dignity and be a maximized human being bringing glory to God. An individual must come to understand the depths of his being if he is to live well on this journey of life.¹ There are many false and even demonic anthropologies that would plunge a human being into ruin (Jn. 10:10): man is God; man is a human machine; race determines value (fascism); man is a biological accident; and many others. History has demonstrated the fruit of false anthropologies, which have led to the deterioration and destruction of human beings.²

The biblical perspective on man created in the image of God brings dignity to a human being and allows him/her to embrace life in a significant and appropriate way, which comes through an authentic biblical anthropology. Without this identity, confusion exists within the

¹ Ines Testoni, et al. The Implicit Image of God: God as Reality and Psychological Well-Being, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 2016, 55 (1): 174-84; Derrick W. Klaasen and Marvin J. McDonald, Quest and Identity Development: Re-Examining Pathways for Existential Search, *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 2002, 12(3), 189-200.

² Paul Johnson, *Intellectuals* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

individual, and given the fallen nature of man and his tendency toward sin and evil, there is no deterrent to self-destruction.

An Authentic Biblical Anthropology: The Biblical Perspective on Man in the Image of God

The verses in the Bible that explicitly state that man is created in the image or likeness of God, *imago Dei*, are found in the following passages: Genesis 1:26, 27; 5:1, 3; 9:6; 1 Corinthians 11:7; Colossians 3:10; and James 3:9. The word image and likeness are both utilized interchangeably and considered synonymous,³ and are essentially a use of Hebrew parallelism. Other passages implicitly indicate this doctrine (e.g., Ps. 8:4-6)

But what does this *imago Dei* involve? How does a human being actual reflect the image of God? It is the thesis of this writer that once a human being becomes aware of his/her value as a human being made in the image of God, this will have positive dramatic effects on how that person lives out his or her life. So, delineating the details of this existential reality is of utmost importance (Ac. 17:24-29).

What We Are Not

It is imperative to realize that though we are made in the image of God, we are not of the same being. God is God; man is man. As observed by Lewis, “Although made like God and in the divine image, humankind is not (like Christ) begotten of God or an emanation from God of the same divine nature.”⁴ This certainly confronts the idea of monism, which posits that there is only one reality, God is all and all is God—reality is God, and since we are part of reality, we

³ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1941), 203.

⁴ G. R. Lewis, “Attributes of God,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd Ed., Walter A. Elwell, Editor (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 499.

have divinity in our innate being. This line of thinking is contrary to orthodox Christianity and the biblical evidence: God and the creation are separate. Thus, human beings are made in the image of God, but we are not God—we do not have “intrinsic divinity.”⁵

The Starting Point: Understanding Who is God

The starting point in understanding humanity is to begin with God. As Bavinck put it: “Man is an enigma whose solution can be found only in God.”⁶ The mystery of our being is only found in the Creator. The question of what is man is not answered in “reference to his soul, deficiencies, or creative power. It becomes concentrated into the personal question, ‘Who am I, my God, before you?’”⁷ There must be caution here in this assessment of things: God is “not simply a superlative form of humanity.”⁸ He is completely other.

There are the communicable attributes of God with which we have significant resonance. The incommunicable attributes are unique to God alone (e.g., the Trinity, innate immortality), which is not germane to this paper. It is the communicable attributes that we will give brief attention in this paper.

With respect to God’s transcendence, “God can never be completely captured in human concepts... There is no way we humans can adequately represent or approach God.”⁹ This being the case, the only reliance is upon revelation from God in Scripture that allows us to assess God and then to look at our own humanity and discover the reality of this resonance as a being made in the image of God. Let’s go into detail which this matter.

⁵ C. F. H. Henry, “Image of God,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 591.

⁶ Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 23.

⁷ Jurgen Moltman, *Man: Christian Anthropology in the Conflicts of the Present* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 14.

⁸ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 285.

⁹ *Ibid*, 289.

Intellectualism/Rationalism

It is quite an extraordinary trait to be a higher rational and thinking being. We have the ability to assess life on objective levels. This rationality to reason things out, develop plans, establish goals, delineate between what is right or wrong, assess what is beautiful or ugly, and have intelligent dialogue with other human beings, “makes us moral beings, and it is the basis for all other dimensions of Godlikeness” as James Packer asserts.¹⁰

The most valuable aspect of this gift is to have thoughts about God and from God (Col. 3:10). How important to realize that “...the human mind has been created in the divine image to think God’s thoughts after him, or to receive through general and special revelation truth from God. Although the fall has affected the human mind, this has not been eradicated. The new birth involves the Holy Spirit’s renewal of the person in knowledge after the image of the Creator.”¹¹

A Likeness Sufficient for Communication

The most wonderful fact of a human being is that he/she is equipped to gain knowledge about God, beyond just general revelation. He has such an affinity with God to have a dialogue. As pointed out by Saucy: “...God created man in his own image, which certainly includes a likeness sufficient for communication.”¹² And that there is a “sense in which man’s knowledge of divine things is the same as God’s.”¹³ This divine spark within us ignited in Christ allow us a special sense of resonance with Him (2 Pet. 1:4).

¹⁰ Lynne Morris, Editor, *The Christian Vision: Man in Society* (Hillsdale, Michigan: Hillsdale College Press, 1984), 112.

¹¹ G. R. Lewis, “Attributes of God,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd Ed., Walter A. Elwell, Editor (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 495.

¹² R. L. Saucy, “Doctrine of God,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd Ed. Walter A. Elwell, Editor (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 500.

¹³ *Ibid*, 501.

Personhood

Humans have personhood—we are not a rock in the field nor a tree in the forest. We are a created being, but we are beyond all other aspects of the creation. It is suggested that we understand ourselves from the angle of God to us vs. us to God. Thus, seeing God theomorphously vs. anthropomorphically. We are a “finite replica of the infinite divine person.”¹⁴ God is suprahuman and we are human. God has been “identified with the ideals of human experience.”¹⁵

The imago Dei involves the ability “to know self as related to the world and God and to determine self in view of moral ends.”¹⁶ This is what makes a human being unique from the animal world. The human being’s ability to be conscious and make moral choices and thus to be holy as God is holy.¹⁷

Creative Ability

An aspect of man in the image of God is with the ability to be creative.¹⁸ Humans are in fact “partners with God in producing what comes to be.”¹⁹ We can work with what has already been created (a material world), or what already exists in spiritual reality, viz., the eternal ideas (e.g, love, aesthetics, joy), which Jung referred to as archetypes.²⁰ An aspect of this creativity is to pour ourselves out in some meaningful way in labor or work. It is through this pouring out of our lives that we imitate God and bring glory to him (Ecc. 9:10). “God has put a spark of divinity in each of us...so that by careful study and diligent labor we can do our work in a way

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid, 503.

¹⁶ Emery Bancroft, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 191.

¹⁷ Ibid, 191-92.

¹⁸ Jordan Raynor, *Called to Create: A Biblical Invitation to Create, Innovate, and Risk* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017).

¹⁹ Erickson, 345.

²⁰ Carl Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (New York: Collins/Fontana, 1967).

that helps to fulfill God's purposes for his creation, [and] our work is one vital way that we can fulfill God's purpose for our lives."²¹

Intimacy and the Trinity

The Scripture gives us clear indication of a closeness/intimacy that has been experienced within the Godhead/Trinity as relational Beings (Jn. 17). It is apparent that we as relational beings are bound up in the reality of this experience of intimacy. We yearn for it and strive to connect with others. This sense within us exists because we are made in the image of a God who connects within His own Being (Father, Son, Holy Spirit).

Love

God is love (1 Jn. 4:8). We are to be imitators of God "as dearly loved children" and to "live a life of love" (Eph. 5:1 New International Version, 1984). The emphasis on this image we bear and must emulate is emphasized greatly by Jesus (Jn. 13:34, 35). Logical existence is rooted in love. The further a human being gets away from love, the further he distorts the reality of his imago Dei and perhaps the greatest expression of that image.

Aesthetics

God is a God who created beauty—He is an aesthetic Being. As a communicable attribute from God, it is quite evident that we can appreciate beauty. Even arrogant, bitter and combative people can be brought to silence as was noted of Schopenhauer who "grew silent in the presence of beautiful music."²² God created a world of beauty and both the Creator and created beings share in an aesthetic intimacy with each other.

²¹ Brain D. Cawley & Peter J. Snyder, "People as Workers in the Image of God: Opportunities to Promote Flourishing." *Journal of Markets & Morality* 18:1 (Spring 2015): 163-187.

²² Insights@thinkr.org on Eric Weiner, *The Socrates Express: In Search of Life Lessons from Dead Philosophers*.

Spirituality

God is spirit (Jn. 4.24) and there is some degree by which we are beyond the flesh and live as spiritual beings—the greatest joys of our existence are spiritual (e.g., love, joy, peace). As Berkhof assert, since God is Spirit, “it is natural to expect that this element of spirituality also finds expression in man as the image of God.”²³ As many have observed, “Man is not so much a human being having a spiritual experience, as he is a spiritual being having a human experience.”²⁴ Man is a spirit who “experiences himself as spirit.”²⁵ Given the theological perspective that a human being’s composite is monistic/a blended unity, this perspective of spiritual reality acknowledges that upon death, the spirit/soul continues in consciousness but is reunited with the body at the resurrection—a spiritual continuum (Lk. 16:19-31; 23:43; 1 Cor. 15:35-57).

Man is beyond mere rationality; he is experiential of which reason has no explanation. Since he is a unique blend of the rational, physical, and of something else that can only be understood as spirit. His mind is able to access his own self in a transcendent way, which amounts to a spiritual capacity.²⁶ And this mind/transcendent self is influence by a greater reality. Man is a transcendent being, which necessitates a reality beyond his physicality.²⁷

²³ Berkhof, L., 204.

²⁴ A quote attributed to Wayne W. Dyer in “A letter to the Next Generation,” *Time* magazine, 1988 October 17, Volume 132, p. 2. quoteinvestigator.com.

²⁵ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Seabury, 1978), 32.

²⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: Human Nature*, Vol. 1. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1964), 162.

²⁷ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*. (New York: Seabury, 1978), 31-35.

The Image After the Fall

There are several postulations regarding the image of God in man after the Fall: man completely lost the image after the Fall; the image was not at all affected by the Fall—man has perpetually retained the image no matter how sinful he/she lives; or, man lost some of his ability to function in this image. This writer contends that the first two positions are extreme and do not represent the biblical evidence. The third position seems best to represent Scripture: the image of God within man was marred by man's Fall but he retains to some degree his ability albeit marred to function in this image (e.g., Nazi's able to love their children and yet abuse and murder Jews during the holocaust). This affinity with God is "irreversible,"²⁸ and "inalienable."²⁹ We live perpetually coram Deo. As Henry puts it: "The fall of humanity is not destructive of the formal image (human personality), although it involves the distortion (though not demolition) of the material content of the image."³⁰ Demarest believes the image of God is sustained (Gen. 9:6) but posits that what has been lost is soundness with reasoning ability, inability to choose God and good, spiritual blindness, and death.³¹ The image of God in man had to remain "otherwise man would not be man."³² Within respect to man's depravity, "Once able not to sin (*posse non peccare*), the unregenerate now are incapable of not sinning (*non posse non peccare*)."³³ The original image was pristine. Sin greatly tainted this image to the point that a human being has an irresistible propensity to sin.

²⁸ Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), 69.

²⁹ Bancroft, 191.

³⁰ Henry, 593.

³¹ B. Demarest, "Fall of the Human Race," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 436.

³² Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of the Evangelical Theology: God, Authority, and Salvation*, Vol. 1. (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 94.

³³ *Ibid.*

Jesus and the Image of God

Christ is the example of what it means to be live in the imago Dei. He is the imago Dei (Jn. 1:14; Phil. 2:6; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3). Therefore, as disciples of Jesus we are being “conformed to the likeness of His Son” (Rom. 8:29 New International Version, 1984), “transformed from one degree of glory to the next” (2 Cor. 3:16-18 New International Version, 1984). Thus, the biblical evidence points to the fact that the imago Dei is restored in the life of a disciple of Jesus and at the same time being restored in a functional manner as he/she undergoes sanctification (1 Th. 4:3, 7; Heb. 9:14; 12:14; 13:12). The imago Deo is being renewed in Christ.

Christ is the example of what it means to be in the imago Dei. He provides the example of living in this theological reality. God demonstrates the reality of Himself in us, the imago Dei. The way of a human being to become fully human through the act of restoration in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

False and Rival Anthropologies

There have been significant shifts in Christianity’s conflict with the secular culture from debates involving creationism, astronomy (e.g., Copernican vs. earth as the center of the universe), geology (e.g., age of the earth, biology (e.g., evolution), origin of humanity beginning, behavioral sciences (e.g., determinism) to now the doctrine of humanity.³⁴ The problem with rival anthropologies is the inevitable tendency to “degrade humanity.”³⁵ Kung gives an exhaustive treatment of the false anthropologies that have distorted the reality of this imago Dei and subsequently has had devastating effects upon humanity.³⁶

³⁴ Ibid, 349.

³⁵ C. F. H. Henry, “Image of God,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 591.

³⁶ Hans Kung, *Does God Exist?* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1980), 191-213, 341-391.

Implications on Embracing the Biblical Perspective on Humanity

The Value and Dignity of a Human Being

As emphasized by Kilner³⁷ and articulated by Baker, man made in the image of God “has been the primary influence in the world to maintain the values and dignity of human beings.”³⁸ False anthropologies, rooted in secular thinkers, inevitably lead to the denigration of a human being. “Humanity’s essential God-likeness is the basis for human dignity and worth...and why human life is sacred and deserving protection.”³⁹ Spronk is accurate in suggesting that “one cannot rightly speak of humans without their relation to their Creator. There is no such thing as human dignity without God: Humans can only function properly and can only reach their destiny in relation with God.”⁴⁰ Without this stamp of dignity upon man, barbarism is the only option—man’s inhumanity to man.

Evangelism: Modeling this Image

The disciple is the “light of the world” and the “salt of the earth” (Mt. 5:13-16 New International Version, 1984). What this essentially boils down to is being Jesus to the world, viz., the image of God in Jesus. This not only provides an example for people to follow (1 Cor. 11:1), but has an effect upon those by making the reality of the doctrine “attractive” (Tit. 2:10 New International Version, 1984). God “manifests” the very attributes of Himself “in the actual circumstances of the believer’s life.”⁴¹ This being the case then the image of God is not merely

³⁷ John F. Kilner, “Humanity in God’s Image: Is the Image Really Damaged,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 53(3), 601-17.

³⁸ William H. Baker, *In the Image of God: A Biblical View of Humanity* (Chicago: Moody, 1991).

³⁹ Glen G. Scorgie, *The Journey Back to Eden*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005.

⁴⁰ Klass Spronk, “The Human Being as the Image of God and Slaughtered in the Name of God: A Biblical Subversion of Ancient and Modern Concepts of Human Dignity.” *Scriptura* 95 (2007): 198.

⁴¹ Baker, 269.

the characteristic of being made in the image of God but is manifesting these attributes of God in the reality of a life lived like God (Eph. 5:1). This anthropology is then a practical theology.

Because every human being is made in the image of God, the Christian faith, which is unique and “robust” with respect to this doctrine, has an unprecedented opportunity to speak a truth axiomatic into the lives of people identified with other faith religions. Since other faiths are oppressive, this doctrine is liberating and resonates with human beings.⁴²

Conclusion: Responding to This Doctrine

It is an astonishing reality to be a human being made in the image of God. With respect to this doctrine, how then must we respond or live in this stunning theological reality? All theology is practical and involves human responsiveness.

First, as we are in the process of sanctification, the disciple of Jesus must continue to press into God: “Oh, that we might know the Lord! Let us press on to know Him. He will respond to us as surely as the arrival of dawn or the coming of rains in early spring” (Hos. 6:3 New Living Translation, 2004); and “Come near to God and He will come near to you” (James 4:8 New International Version, 1984). Since, the image of God is gradually and more fully being restored in us, it is incumbent upon us to connect with the one whom we have this resonance. The image it is more caught than taught, and in a connection with God our hearts become like the One whom we have connectivity. *Second*, we must yield to the Holy Spirit who is attempting to transform us more fully into the image of His son (2 Cor. 3:17,18). *Third*, we

⁴² Keller, Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018), p. 18-21.

become more like the one we fixate upon—to be more fully into the imago Dei, we must “fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:2 New International Version).

God “manifests” the very attributes of Himself “in the actual circumstances of the believer’s life.”⁴³ This being the case then the image of God is not merely the characteristic of being made in the image of God but is manifesting these attributes of God in the reality of a life lived like God (Eph. 5:1). This anthropology is then a practical theology.

This resonance with God amounts to a recognition of the desperate need for the true and living God. Niebuhr is quite profound with this perspective:

The real situation is that man who is made in the image of God is unable, precisely because of those qualities in him which are designated as “image of God,” to be satisfied with a god who is made in man’s image. By virtue of his capacity for self-transcendence he can look beyond himself sufficiently to know that a projection of himself is not God.⁴⁴

Upon the entrance into eternity, the preciousness of our humanity is depicted by a rabbinic scenario that suggests “that whenever a man or woman walks down the street [of heaven] he or she is preceded by an invisible choir of angels crying, ‘Make way, make way! Make way for the image of God.’”⁴⁵ Perhaps in eternity will we realize the value of our humanity—a human being made in the image of God.

⁴³ Ibid, 269.

⁴⁴ Niebuhr, 166.

⁴⁵ Huston Smith, *The World’s Religions* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 281.

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